

Essay

The Illuminating Experience of Being Kept in the Dark

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The idea of Deep Throat has slipped away. The man lives, according to *Vanity Fair* and confirmed by *The Washington Post*, reduced to just that — an old man, W. Mark Felt, with his moldered and complete Washington résumé, including a presidential pardon, liv-

ing with his daughter in California, allowed two glasses of wine with dinner.

What's gone is the last best secret, wrested from the grip of the select few who'd vowed to keep it. The hiding of Deep Throat's identity took on a larger mythic status than any scoop Deep Throat provided, and much of Washington — media, officialdom, even tourists who snapped the Watergate

complex — guarded the almost holy belief in Deep Throat. He was the perfect, nameless god. It was the idea that reporters (and their background sources) could save the world, and that trust was still trust, and truth was still true. People now go to parking garages to get their cars.

What could be more of a let-down than finding out who Deep Throat is? Finding it out in *Vanity*

Fair? And not really finding it out in *Vanity Fair* so much as feeling it crash-land across the Internet and the cable news networks, days before the magazine even hits the stands? Finding out that you don't care anymore? Watching it not resonate among people younger than 30?

The concept of Deep Throat

See ESSAY, C7, Col. 3

Stepping Out of the Garage and Into the Light

ESSAY, From *C1*

once set the rules of the town. People practiced Deep Throat etiquette (let's meet at an out-of-the-way place), Deep Throat ways (don't call me on this phone), Deep Throat marvel (how'd they get that?). There was great industry in the clandestine, in whispering.

It helped that it had a dirty, porny nickname, which came right from the swagger and irreverence of journalism's then-new era, asserting itself while cracking wise.

Journalism schools were suddenly overcrowded with people who all wanted to find the next Deep Throat. Neckties were wide. Robert Redford, IBM Selectrics, pay phones, the clutter, the drabness and wonder of the '70s: Everyone wanted a piece of it, and some days you can still get a whiff of what it might have felt like. It was possible, our ancestors inform us, to go to a bar and tell a girl that you were a reporter for The Washington Post and she might go home with you. That was part of the allure of the Deep Throat culture — the reporter as chick magnet. (Now she would tell you that she doesn't really ever look at the paper. Or worse, she only looks at it online.)

People soon got over their lust for reporters, but they still want Deep Throat, or something very much like him, and they demand that reporters still go looking for him. It's like sending signals in the sky to a Batman who never answers.

Aggrieved readers beseech reporters and editors to swoop in and shine the beacon of unstoppable truth, always aided by the well-



WARNER BROS.

With his back to the camera, Deep Throat meets with Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) in "All the President's Men."

placed, anonymous source. *Expose the bastards*. Bring down the president every four or five years, every month, every week, every day. To be a reporter now is to get all kinds of e-mail: *How come you guys aren't looking into [blank]?! When are you going to blow the lid off the obvious [blank] of the [blank]?!* Newspapers launch vast ships of investigative reportage and still all anybody is really looking for — in any of the five, six, seven installments of the series — is the paragraph that will approximate the Deep Throat thrill.

Gone is a sort of tidy, narrow

definition of evil, of corruption. The gotcha is now a tawdry exercise in minutiae, not a blow against the Establishment, against the Man. "What did he know and when did he know it" puts us to sleep. "Follow the money" is an exercise in Excel spreadsheets, occasionally praised by prize committees, but rarely read.

It turns out being in the dark about Deep Throat was more enthralling than holding it out to the light. Had he lived in this era, Deep Throat might not have lasted long. He'd be blogged to bits. He'd be Drudged, smudged, Romenesko'd.

People would disprove him with their own Deep Throats. His identity would be discovered within a news cycle or two, spun around, and he'd be left holding a book contract.

Perhaps Deep Throat's lovely (and daring) parting gift to Washington, especially to reporters, is simple: He actually exists. He is not fabrication or composite. He is one man, a fact not easily proved had he taken his secret to the grave. That in itself, in an era where trust has been shredded beyond recognition, is something to behold.